

'It's a Wonderful Life: A Radio Play' offers unique twist on classic tale

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Those who've seen "It's a Wonderful Life" haven't seen it like this.

"It's a Wonderful Life: A Radio Play" will open 3 p.m. Nov. 29 and continue through Dec. 8 at the Raue Center for the Arts, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake.

Presented by Williams Street Repertory, the production features a retelling of the classic Bedford Falls story through a series of vignettes told in a radio studio.

Unlike other productions of "It's a Wonderful Life: A Radio Play," which often include cast members holding microphones and scripts, this production will include a live jazz orchestra and 45 scene changes. Hanging microphones and the sliding in and out of furniture will allow the setting to become more intimate as more emotional, intense scenes take place, said the director, Tom Burke-Kaiser of Chicago.

"It's a different approach than what most people have done with this play," Burke-Kaiser said. "We're just really re-imagining this piece entirely, creating something new that hasn't been created with this piece before."

Directing his first production at the Raue, Burke-Kaiser has worked in theater, film and television as a director, producer, educator and actor for more than 20 years.

He's known Richard Kuranda, the founding artistic director of Williams Street Repertory and executive director of the Raue, since the two earned degrees at the Actors Studio Drama School in New York City.

A common production during the holiday season, with two different theaters currently putting on "It's a Wonderful Life: A Radio Play" in Burke-Kaiser's neighborhood, the director sought a new approach with this year's Raue show.

Burke-Kaiser wanted more movement in the production to better reflect the emotion and wonder of it, and to create a more intimate feeling. The production's nine actors take on 67 different characters, remaining on stage throughout the entire performance.

"This is a play that's kind of about wonder," Burke Kaiser said. "It's also about sacrifice ... It's a complex piece."

His goal, he said, is for the production to touch on all of the senses of audience members.

David Lowenthal of Chicago, who plays George Bailey in the production, emphasized the uniqueness of it. At times, the story is taken out of the radio studio, where "It's a Wonderful Life" is being retold, to intimate scenes that allow the audience to see what's going on in George's mind.

“The way we’re presenting it, it’s not at all a traditional radio play,” Lowenthal said. “There’s much more action.

“I think that it’s definitely worth anybody’s time to come out and see it. If people have seen this classic performed on stage, it’s generally done as a straight radio play. Just based off of that, I think they’d be remiss to miss this particular show.”

Along with Lowenthal, the cast includes four actors from Chicago as well as four actors from this area, creating a mix of both Chicago and local professionals.

To emphasize the holiday appeal of the production, it opens with a matinee and is followed by Crystal Lake’s Festival of Lights Parade 7 p.m. Nov. 29 in downtown Crystal Lake.

“It’s sort of a magical holiday experience,” said Alicia Regan of Lakewood, an original member of Williams Street Repertory who plays “Mary Bailey” in the production. “You don’t have many towns like Crystal Lake or like Bedford Falls anymore. It’s really wonderful to be a part of it.”